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English

BHAKTI IN SILENCE: RECLAIMING POWER THROUGH RITUAL IN DESHPANDE'S WOMEN

KEY WORDS: Bhakti, Gendered Resilience, Ritual, Silence, Tulsi Puja

Manju Kumari

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Arunachal University of Studies

Prof. (Dr.) Amar Kumar Nayak

Research Supervisor, Department of English, Arunachal University of Studies

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intimate and transformative dimensions of bhakti in the lives of female protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, and *A Matter of Time*. Moving beyond traditional interpretations of devotion as submission, it foregrounds ritual as a quiet language of agency, especially within the domestic spaces where Deshpande's women negotiate trauma, estrangement, and identity. By performing everyday sacraments like tulsi puja and Ganapati worship, the characters reinterpret inherited customs as spiritual tools for self-assertion and resilience. Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks including Butler's performativity and Bowlby's attachment theory, the study argues that Deshpande's fiction recasts silence not as erasure, but as a site of spiritual resistance. Ritual devotion becomes a medium through which cultural identity is preserved and reclaimed, allowing her protagonists to subtly challenge patriarchal expectations while remaining anchored in tradition. The fusion of myth, memory, and sacred practice reveals bhakti as a feminist invocation - a spiritual modality that births autonomy in the shadow of obedience.

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande's fiction is renowned for its intimate portrayal of Indian women navigating the complex terrain of tradition, modernity, and selfhood. Her protagonists often dwell in silence - not as passive sufferers, but as thinkers, seekers, and quiet rebels. This paper examines how ritualistic bhakti practices in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *That Long Silence*, and *A Matter of Time* become tools of spiritual agency and feminist resistance. It argues that Deshpande reconfigures silence and devotion not as submission, but as subtle acts of autonomy. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and John Bowlby's attachment theory, the study explores how ritual becomes a language of resilience, allowing women to reclaim power within patriarchal domestic spaces. Deshpande's fiction is deeply embedded in the Indian ethos, where women are often portrayed as the silent bearers of tradition. Her protagonists - Saru, Jaya, and Sumi are not rebels in the conventional sense, but they resist through quiet rituals and introspective silence. Bhakti, traditionally seen as submission to the divine, becomes in Deshpande's hands a language of resilience and reclamation.

Objective

This paper aims to examine how ritualistic bhakti practices in Deshpande's novels function as spiritual strategies for female autonomy. It explores how silence, often misread as passivity, becomes a site of resistance when paired with sacred ritual. Through feminist and psychoanalytic lenses, the study reveals how Deshpande's protagonists reclaim power within patriarchal domestic spaces by reinterpreting inherited devotional customs.

Literature Review

Scholars have long debated Deshpande's feminist stance. Prabhu and Shameem (2021) argue that her protagonists are caught between tradition and modernity, often forced to reconcile cultural expectations with personal desires. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu's oscillation between ritual and rebellion exemplifies this tension. Similarly, Issack (2020) highlights how *A Matter of Time* uses sacred practices like Ganapati worship and immersion rites to express grief and resilience, suggesting that ritual is not merely cultural performance but emotional anchoring.

Israel and Kumar (2021) emphasize the mythological conditioning of Deshpande's women, noting how figures like Sita and Gandhari shape their internalized roles. Yet Deshpande's protagonists often subvert these roles; Jaya in

That Long Silence uses silence not as submission but as a form of spiritual protest. Jena (2021) further explores how Deshpande's women, especially Sumi and Jaya, transform domestic rituals into acts of self-definition, challenging the myth of the self-sacrificing woman.

Historical bhakti figures offer further context. Kabir's anti-ritual stance and egalitarian spirituality resonate with Indu's rejection of ceremonial conformity. Mirabai's devotional defiance of patriarchal norms parallels Jaya's quiet resistance. Akkamahadevi and Andal, whose embodied bhakti challenged gendered expectations, echo Saru's and Sumi's spiritual interiority. These figures reveal that bhakti has long been a site of feminist expression, not merely devotional submission.

Theoretical Context

Judith Butler's theory of performativity posits that gender is not a fixed identity but a series of repeated acts within a regulatory context. In Deshpande's novels, rituals like 'tulsi puja' and 'Ganapati' worship are performed within patriarchal structures but reinterpreted by women to assert agency. These acts become performative gestures that challenge gender norms while remaining culturally legible. Jaya's ritual engagement, for instance, is not passive inheritance but a deliberate performance that re-signifies her role within the domestic sphere.

John Bowlby's attachment theory provides insight into the emotional significance of ritual. Rituals serve as secure anchors in unstable relationships, whether between mother and child, wife and husband, or self and society. For Deshpande's protagonists, devotional acts are not merely religious - they are psychological strategies for coping with abandonment, trauma, and emotional estrangement. Saru's temple visits and Sumi's immersion rites reflect attempts to reconstruct emotional continuity in the absence of nurturing relationships.

Textual Analysis

The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980)

Saru's relationship with her mother is fraught with rejection and silence. Her estrangement is mirrored in her spiritual disconnection. Yet, as she returns to her childhood home, she begins to engage with rituals that once alienated her. "I hated the rituals, the rules, the restrictions. But now, I see them differently. They are not chains - they are threads" (Deshpande, 1980, p. 147). This shift marks a reclamation of

spiritual space. Bowlby's theory helps us understand Saru's ritual acts as attempts to rebuild a secure emotional base. Her silence becomes a meditative act, a way of processing trauma and reconnecting with her roots. Like Akkamahadevi, whose bhakti was both spiritual and political, Saru's solitary devotion becomes a form of embodied resistance.

Roots and Shadows (1983)

Indu's rejection of ritual reflects a different kind of agency. She mocks the idea of praying to the 'tulsi' plant to increase her husband's lifespan, yet finds herself drawn to it. "Despite her education and exposure, she was no different from women who moved round the 'tulsi' plant" (Deshpande, 1983, p.86). Kabir's anti-ritual stance helps contextualize Indu's ambivalence. Her refusal to participate in family ceremonies is a counter-performance, challenging the script of ideal femininity. Butler's concepts reveals that both the act of engaging in ritual and the choice to reject it can serve as performative expressions of gendered agency, challenging normative expectations of feminine behavior.

That Long Silence (1988)

Jaya's engagement with 'tulsi puja' is layered with irony and introspection. She performs the ritual, not out of belief, but as a way to reclaim her space. "I had done the tulsi puja perfunctorily, but I did it. I did it because it was mine, not his" (Deshpande, 1989, p. 112). This act, though seemingly submissive, is a quiet assertion of identity. Her silence is not void - it is sacred space. "Their unconscious, unmeaning heroism born out of the myth of self-sacrificing martyred woman did not arouse either pity or admiration" (p. 110). Jaya's refusal to glorify suffering marks her spiritual awakening. Her engagement with ritual is ambivalent. She critiques its emptiness, yet returns to it in moments of crisis. Butler's theory of performativity suggests that gender is not innate but enacted through repeated behaviors. Jaya's ritual acts - though seemingly conformist - are reclaimed as self-authored performances. She chooses when and how to engage, thus re-signifying ritual as autonomy, not submission.

A Matter of Time (1996)

Sumi's spiritual journey is marked by grief and detachment. Her participation in Ganapati worship and immersion rites is deeply personal. "She stood still, watching the water take the ashes. She felt no tears, only a strange calm" (Deshpande, 1996, p. 89). Through sacred practice, Sumi finds a language for her pain - a language that does not require confrontation but offers healing. Bowlby's concept of internal working models suggests that Sumi's rituals help her maintain emotional continuity for her daughters. Her silence, paired with ritual, becomes a maternal language of care and strength. Like Andal, whose bhakti was poetic and embodied, Sumi's devotion is quiet reclamation of selfhood.

DISCUSSION

Across Deshpande's novels, ritual is not monolithic. For Saru, it's emotional healing; for Jaya, it's a site of ambivalence; for Sumi, it is quiet endurance; for Indu, it's rejection. Yet in each case, ritual becomes a strategic response to patriarchal silencing. Silence, when paired with ritual, is not passivity it is a coded language of resistance. Deshpande's fiction challenges the binary of tradition versus modernity. Her women do not reject ritual, they reinterpret it. Bhakti becomes a feminist invocation, a spiritual modality through which silence is transformed into agency.

Butler's performativity helps us see these rituals as gendered performances that subvert patriarchal expectations. Bowlby's theory reveals their emotional depth, showing how ritual anchors identity in the face of trauma.

Historical bhakti figures like Mirabai, Kabir, Andal, and Akkamahadevi offer a lineage of spiritual resistance that Deshpande's protagonists inherit and reconfigure. These

saints used devotion to challenge caste, gender, and domestic confinement. Deshpande's protagonists echo this legacy - not through overt rebellion, but through quiet endurance, sacred performance, and emotional reclamation.

The fusion of myth, memory, and sacred practice in Deshpande's novels reveals a quiet revolution. Her protagonists do not shout they perform. They do not escape they endure. And in their endurance, they reclaim power.

CONCLUSION

Shashi Deshpande's women live in silence and ritual not as victims, but as agents of transformation. Through bhakti, they preserve cultural identity while subtly resisting patriarchal norms. Ritual becomes a language of resilience, and silence becomes a site of spiritual resistance. By integrating feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks, this paper reveals Deshpande's fiction as a profound meditation on autonomy, tradition, and the quiet power of devotion.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity illuminates how Deshpande's protagonists engage with gender not as a fixed role but as a series of embodied choices. Whether they participate in rituals like 'tulsi puja' or reject them outright, their actions become performative expressions of agency. Silence, too, is reframed not as erasure, but as a deliberate withdrawal from oppressive discourse, a counter-performance that reclaims emotional and spiritual space.

John Bowlby's attachment theory deepens our understanding of these rituals as emotional anchors. Saru's temple visits, Sumi's immersion rites, and Jaya's domestic rhythms are not passive habits but psychological strategies for coping with trauma, abandonment, and relational instability. These acts reflect a longing for security and continuity, especially in the absence of nurturing relationships.

The historical echoes of bhakti saints like Mirabai, Kabir, Andal, and Akkamahadevi further contextualize Deshpande's protagonists within a lineage of spiritual resistance. These figures used devotion to challenge caste, gender, and domestic confinement, often through silence, poetry, and ritual. Deshpande's women inherit this legacy, transforming inherited customs into tools of self-definition.

To conclude Deshpande's fiction offers a radical reimagining of bhakti - not as submission, but as invocation. Her protagonists do not seek liberation through rebellion alone; they find it in the sacred, in the quiet, and in the everyday. Their rituals are not relics - they are revolutions. And in the shadow of obedience, they birth autonomy.

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